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# Museums' community engagement schemes, austerity and practices of care in two local museum services

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In recent years geographers have paid attention to the practices and spaces of care, yet museums rarely feature in this body of literature. Drawing on research conducted with two large museum services – one in England, and one in Scotland - this paper frames museums' community engagement programmes as spaces of care. We offer insights into the practice of community engagement, and note how this is changing as a result of austerity. Our focus is on the routine, everyday caring practices of museum community engagement workers. We further detail the new and renewed strategic partnerships that have been forged as a result of cutbacks in the museum sector and beyond. We note that museums' community engagement workers are attempting to position themselves relative to a number of other institutions and organisations at the current moment. Drawing on empirical material from the two case study sites, we suggest that museums' community engagement programmes could be seen as fitting within a broader landscape of care, and we conceptualise their activities as expressions of progressive localism.

**Keywords:** care, community engagement, museums, austerity, professional identity, progressive localism.

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## **Introduction**

In recent years increased attention has been paid to the practices and spaces that facilitate care, yet museums seldom feature in this literature (for exceptions see Munro 2013, 2014; Silverman, 2010). Drawing on recent work within geographies of care, we argue that museums' community engagement schemes can usefully be understood as spaces of care (cf Conradson, 2003), with implications beyond their immediate sites. We use the term 'community engagement' to denote museum programmes that usually involve individuals or groups who do not or cannot use museums, and that may take place both in museums and in a range of community spaces.

This paper draws together material gathered as part of two separate research projects which ran nearly concurrently, concerning the practice of community engagement in two museum services, in the North of England and Scotland. Within both projects, care emerged in two ways: through the ordinary, everyday performances and practices of staff within community engagement sessions, and within networks encompassing community-led projects, voluntary organisations, and the formal social care sector.

Geographers have provided important insights into the formations that care may take within organisational and institutional spaces. Askew (2009, p. 655), for example, has called for research to investigate care as part of staff's everyday performances within 'peopled and practised state institutions'. Conradson's (2003a, 2003b) work on drop-in centres similarly emphasised the importance of ordinary, daily routines in the formation of spaces of care (see also Parr, 2000; Darling, 2011). More generally, this work seeks to reinvigorate the study of organisations and institutions via a focus on individuals' daily routines and practices (Conradson, 2003b). Here, we build on and extend these authors' insights by detailing the mundane practices of 'doing' care in the museum – an institution not traditionally oriented towards care. The first task of the paper is to describe the practice of community engagement and to narrate the spaces within which this work takes place.

Beyond this, the aim of the paper is to examine how the caring that is done within museum engagement schemes is evolving in response to the current period of financial austerity. Drawing on interviews and observation, we explore the experience of museum professionals in the context of uneven cut backs and public sector reform, and their responses to cuts not only in the museum sector, but across social services at a local level.

What comes through the two case studies are the efforts of museum professionals in forging alliances and new partnerships between museums, social service agencies and voluntary organisations at a local level. We highlight the significance of museum staff's professional identities in shaping these responses. We argue that attempts to create spaces of care in community engagement programmes take on a politicised complexion in the context of ongoing austerity, and frame this in terms of resistance. We join with other authors (Featherstone, Ince, Mackinnon, Strauss and Cumbers, 2012; Williams, Cloke and Thomas, 2014) to frame this work as progressive articulations of localism, and understand the formation of spaces of care within museum engagement programmes as contributing to a localised and collaborative 'landscape of care' (Milligan and Wiles, 2010).

'Localism' has received a largely negative response from critical scholars, being seen as a vehicle for the 'rolling back' of the public sector. However, recent geographical scholarship has sought to uncover articulations of 'progressive localism' (Featherstone et al., 2012). Taking a critical view of the outworkings of neoliberal governance in the local contexts of the two research sites, we detail what Williams et al (2014, p. 2799, emphasis in original) have termed the 'resistance occurring *in the meantime*, in amongst the local activities of local governance and third sector-agencies'. The paper makes a particular contribution in its empirical description of the practice of care within community engagement settings, and the way in which austerity is affecting this.

To build our argument, the paper proceeds in four parts. We first provide a brief overview of the geographical work on care, locating it within very 'ordinary' practices and spaces, and then review more recent research that examines the practice of care under conditions of austerity. The next

sections discuss how museums' community engagement programmes have developed within a cultural policy context that is increasingly aligned with broader social policy objectives. We draw particular attention to the most recent policy shifts and cutbacks insofar as they apply to the museum sector. This provides the background for understanding the contexts within which engagement schemes are planned and executed. Following a methodological note, we use empirical material from our two cases to illustrate care in the context of museum engagement schemes. We then show how the professional identities of staff are important in understanding the formation that care takes within each site. The final part of the paper examines how museum professionals are negotiating the effects of austerity in their local areas, and investigates the new spaces of care being created in partnership with local agencies and organisations. In this way it is possible to discern the ways in which museums are contributing to progressive forms of localism.

### **Geographies of care and museum geographies.**

Conradson (2003a, 2003b) notes that a key analytical feature of the literature on spaces of care is a focus on the intersections between the 'psycho-social' relationships that constitute care and the material features of the spaces within which these relationships are emplaced. Conradson's (2003a, p. 451; 2003b) articulation is useful as it allows for analysis of the formations that care takes outside of a medical context: care is defined as 'ethic of encounter, or a set of practices which shape human geographies beyond the familiar sites of care provision'. There is now a rich body of geographical literature that focuses on the very 'ordinary' spaces that might facilitate care, including cafes (Warner, Talbot, and Bennison, 2013), parks (Laws, 2009), allotments and community gardens (Milligan, Gatrell and Bingley., 2004; Parr, 2007), drop-in centres (Conradson, 2003b; Darling 2011), homeless shelters (Johnsen, Cloke and May, 2005) and arts spaces (Parr, 2008). The broader idea of 'landscapes of care' (Milligan and Wiles, 2010) has been developed as a framework for examining the complex spatialities that emerge from relationships of care across these different spaces. Museums do not feature prominently in this body of work however we argue that as public spaces (where the very

notion of ‘publicness’ is often debated) their priorities and key concerns differ considerably from some of the other spaces of care outlined above, and that they therefore merit further attention.

The recent geographical turn towards examining ‘ordinary’ spaces of care presents care in a more general – but also, arguably, a more radical – sense, as embedded within everyday social relations. In this formulation, care is perhaps best understood as a *practice*: as the articulation of an interest in the welfare of others in practical ways (Conradson, 2003b, p. 508; Milligan and Wiles 2010). It is in this spirit that we talk about care in the museum: as a set of practices, inevitably shaped by the ‘museumness<sup>ii</sup>’ of the situation, drawn together by the common ambition of supporting individuals – practically and emotionally – where needed. One potential danger with such an understanding of care, however, is that care could be seen as ‘everywhere’, effectively masking the complex social, political and cultural forces that shape geographies of care, and closing down critique of the gendered and, increasingly, racialised nature of care. What we seek to do in this paper is show that the caring that is done within our respective museum contexts is, inevitably, shaped by wider social, political and cultural forces, and as a result, finds different and distinctively local modes of expression.

While there has been relatively little work conducted on the mundane activities that we feel constitute care in museum, there is a growing body of work that explicitly considers the museum’s links to health and wellbeing (for an overview see Chatterjee and Noble, 2013), as well as more policy-facing work aimed at presenting the potential of the cultural and heritage sectors as sites for public health interventions (Camic and Chatterjee, 2013). As we show, one way in which this finds expression is via the building of strategic partnerships between museum and the formal care sectors.

### **Austerity, localism and care**

In the UK, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government has been marked by austerity, and a radical set of reforms to public services, in particular, welfare provision. The coalition’s ‘Politics of Austerity’ (MacLeavy, 2011) understands the cost of public sector service provision and administration as a major factor in the UK’s financial crisis. The deficit reduction policy has therefore

focused on the lowering of public expenditure, leading to significant reductions to public sector employment and the contracting out of services, effectively leading to reification of ‘the neoliberal model’ (Hall, Massey, and Rustin, 2013, p.4). One key feature of austerity ‘this time around’ is its expression through new forms of localism (Featherstone et al., 2012). Localism was key to the so-called ‘Big Society’ rhetoric, which formed a central part of the Conservative Party election manifesto in 2010<sup>iii</sup>. The language of the Big Society has largely disappeared from political discourse, however many of its core tenets remain, most notably, the enrolment of charities, social and community enterprises, and co-operatives in filling the gap left by reduced public service budgets and other forms of state intervention. This has been formalised within the 2011 Localism Act in England (Clarke and Cochrane, 2013).

A feature of the current period of austerity is the pressure on public service providers to build new strategic partnerships in order to mitigate the effects of cuts (Alcock, 2010). Within this context, changes to the social care and healthcare sectors have been profound (Clayton, Donovan and Merchant, 2015; Grimshaw and Rubery, 2012). In England, health reforms as part of the Health and Social Care Act (2012) have reorganised the provision of health services by extending the variety of provider organisations to include public and private sector, charity, voluntary or social enterprise organisations. While the political situation is different in the devolved Scotland, notably in terms of the vision for social care (Hall & McGarrol, 2013), austerity has had wide-ranging effects which have similarly affected the public sector and local authorities; hence, we view the two case studies presented in this paper as complementary.

In a sense we could be seen to be living in ‘uncaring times’, where the logics of neoliberalism are inescapable. However Williams et al (2014, p. 2806) caution against seeing neoliberalism in these totalising terms, which have tended to produce a narrative whereby those organisations – third-sector, voluntary and otherwise – that become aligned with external, instrumental goals, are seen as ‘dupes’ of neoliberalism, with little attention paid to how they might seek opportunities to resist. Williams et al (2014, p. 2806 and p. 2798) argue instead that it is important to examine how the technologies of

neoliberal government at work in a range of organisations and institutions can be ‘subverted from within’ and to recognise ‘forms of interstitial politics of resistance and experimentation’ (see also Barnes and Prior, 2009; Hall and Smith, 2014; Tronto, 2010; Williams et al., 2012).

Levitas (2012) suggests care as one of the principles through which localism might be reclaimed along progressive lines. Her work complements recent research that has argued for the construction of new political narratives that seek to excavate progressive articulations of localism. Featherstone et al (2012, p.179–180), similarly call for researchers to examine the ‘diverse and socially heterogeneous political constituencies that can be active in shaping localisms from below’. Spaces such as foodbanks have been highlighted as part of such alternative and emerging local politics (Williams et al. 2014), as spaces and sets of relationships that offer the possibility of an ‘ethics of the local’ (Gibson-Graham, 2003). In relation to the formal health and social care sector, Hall and McGarrol (2013, p. 692) position progressive localism as acknowledging cuts to care budgets but in a way that can also generate debate and innovative practice, and which conceives of ‘care’ more broadly as ‘a set of social relationships within a range of formal and informal spaces and practices’.

### **Community engagement work in museums: policy contexts and professional interpretations**

Museums have long been implicated in the social realm and debates around the relationships between the museum and its communities have been a central concern of museological literature (e.g. Watson, 2007; Weil, 1999). While the nineteenth century museums imagined themselves as both pedagogic and benignly prescriptive (Bennett, 1995), the current museum field is concerned with reimagining a museum that is clearly relevant in today’s society. Alongside these theoretical deliberations, in the UK context, cultural policy has played a significant role in shaping the idea and structure of ‘community engagement’ in museums. In the 1990s, New Labour’s social inclusion policies effectively re-worked the public role of the museum into broader social policy objectives well beyond its traditional curatorial and even educational functions. In England, there were explicit expectations for museums and galleries to function as a means of overcoming social disadvantage through their



public service role as ‘agents of social change’, delivering positive outcomes for individuals and communities (DCMS, 2000; Sandell, 1998).

Social inclusion policies required that museums engage priority target ‘communities’, including people from minority ethnic groups, socio-economically deprived areas, and disability groups. Beyond this, it required museums to work in partnership with a range of local organisations, including social services and the voluntary sector, to address areas as varied as unemployment, neighbourhood regeneration, community development, crime and health (Tlili, 2012; Tlili, Gewirtz and Cribb, 2007). While Scotland is a devolved nation with a measure of autonomy over its affairs in the cultural field, similar instrumental expectations have fallen upon museums (McCall, 2009, 2010). The New Labour period is often described as ‘the golden age’ for museums and funding, marked by a period of capacity building in terms of outreach and learning staff (Hein, 2006) who delivered new projects under the banner of social inclusion, both in England and Scotland (e.g. Dodd and Sandell, 2001).

These national contexts profoundly affect the institutional frameworks within which engagement is practiced (for example in terms of performance management indicators, see Gray, 2012; Tlili, 2012); however for most museums, community engagement priorities and practices developed largely in response to local contexts since local authorities are the main funders of museums services across England and Scotland. In addition to the cultural policy and local authority environments, there are a multiplicity of other influences and pressures that direct the work of museums, including demands from professional associations and non-governmental bodies (such as Arts Council for England and Museums and Galleries Scotland), legal requirements, and internal demands (McCall and Gray, 2014). It is important to take into account these pressures, as they illustrate the complex environments within which museum staff operate.

While New Labour policies were marked by a succession of largely ideologically coherent policy directions and a period of investments in cultural projects, the coalition government years have been characterised by a ‘vacuum of ideas, passion, and commitment about culture’ (Pratley, 2015, p. 67)

and a cultural policy driven by austerity politics. In England, one policy action resulting from the national debt reduction programme was the structural reform of the sector, most notable in the abolition of the Museums Libraries and Archives Council (MLA) and the transfer of its museum functions of the Arts Council for England (ACE). An equally rapid move was the retreat from New Labour's instrumentalism in culture, with the announcement, one month into government, of staff reductions of 50% in The Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), signalling the coalition's intention to revert culture to a marginal government department (Gordon et al., 2015). DCMS's budget was cut by 15% over four years, with further DCMS cuts then passed to ACE in 2012, on top of the 30% cut applied to ACE in 2010. Further cuts were announced in subsequent Spending Reviews and Autumn Statements, and austerity is set to continue under the recently-elected Conservative majority government. Scotland's cultural sector, funded from Westminster via the block grant, has arguably been insulated from the worst of the cuts, although recent years have seen significant budget decreases. The reduction of state funding for museums been underlined by the government's opposition to direct grants and its emphasis on private investments and philanthropy to meet the shortfall in state funding and as a solution to austerity, a discourse which key funding bodies for the sector seem to have been persuaded to advocate (Babbidge, 2015).

The most immediate and devastating effects of the cuts for many museums both in Scotland and England has been felt in terms the reduction of local council's budgetary contributions. Because museums are non-statutory, provision by local government is discretionary, and as Kawashima (1997) has noted, it is most at risk when resources are scarce. Faced with significant government grant reductions a number of local councils have made proportionately higher cuts to their arts and culture provision, with some councils in Scotland announcing 100% reductions (Briggs, 2013). The scale of the damage of the cuts to the museum sector has been documented in the yearly Museums Association cuts surveys<sup>iv</sup>. As programmes whose 'return' is not readily convertible into economic value, community engagement and outreach are vulnerable, with high profile organisations such as the Victoria and Albert Museum in London scaling back its diversity team, and English Heritage closing down its outreach department (Atkinson, 2010, 2013). In Scotland the effects of austerity have been

less dramatic and larger museum services, particularly those in Scotland's 'Central Belt', have been able to keep levels of outreach and community engagement work relatively steady, in part due to the increase in investment in these areas associated with the Commonwealth Games (held in Glasgow in summer 2014). Overall however, community engagement in museums has tended to operate through short term project funding, and generally it has not been embedded into core structures or core funding streams (Lynch, 2011). Another effect of the cuts in both Scotland and England has been that many of the local voluntary organisations and community groups that have been partners in museum engagement programmes are suffering, and some have disappeared altogether.

At one level then there is a story about museum's outreach and engagement work which aligns with the conditions of cultural policy and favourable (or otherwise) funding arrangements. The policy drive to reconfigure the role of museum as a public service has received significant academic attention (Bennett, 2003; Gray, 2008; Kawashima, 2006; Newman and McLean, 2004; O'Neill, 2008). The perceived instrumentalisation of museums has largely been based on a view which privileges a soft-disciplinary discourse and the dominance of structural policy effects. While we are not exactly in dispute with this argument, we want to emphasise the everyday actions of museum workers, which we feel complicate the negotiation of the museum's social role. In the field of cultural policy studies, examination of policy implementation have revealed that museum workers are key agents in interpreting, mediating and reconfiguring the wide-ranging policy expectations for museum, linked to professional values and beliefs (McCall and Gray, 2014) and professional subjectivities and identities<sup>v</sup> (Paquette, 2012). For example, in England, Tlili (2008) has examined how the concept of social inclusion was reconfigured within other museum priorities, although chiefly with the effect of diverting away from its core principles, as it became reduced to a box-ticking exercise. On the other hand, McCall (2010) showed how, in Scotland, the policy ambiguity surrounding social inclusion also opened up spaces for museum workers to reappropriate its language to pursue their own activities. In this view practice does not simply follow orderings of state power, rather it is also reconfigured 'on the ground' in often-contradictory ways. As we will go on to show in the empirical discussion, social inclusion has been an important concept in driving community engagement practice across our two

museum case sites, where it has been configured in different ways and where its legacy still influences professional values and the work of engagement with communities.

## **Methodology**

The comparative analysis presented in this paper draws together empirical material gathered as part of two separate doctoral research projects which ran nearly concurrently. The first research project, undertaken by Munro, began in 2008 and addressed the work of community engagement staff working within a large, urban municipal museum service in Scotland (henceforth the Municipal Museum)<sup>vi</sup>. Morse, through a collaborative project beginning in 2010 with a large regional museum service in the North of England (henceforth the Regional Museum) focused on the service's Outreach team and their partnerships with social care and healthcare services (see Morse, 2013).

The Municipal Museum and the Regional Museum are similar in a number of important ways which enable us to bring their engagement work into conversation. Both are large, multi-sited services with vast collections including art, social history, science and industry, and fashion, and both have a long history of socially-engaged museum work which has taken a variety of forms, including co-curated exhibitions, collaborative collecting projects and community advisory boards. Both museums have a similar number of staff (c. 300), and similarly sized outreach/engagement teams (8-15). Both museums have complex funding structures, which include local authority funding, central funding and other grant contributions which tend to support project work. As a point of difference, in terms of governance the Regional Museum is local authority museum while the Municipal Museum is administered by an arms-length company. Though ostensibly independent from the local authority, in practice it still aligns itself closely with council priorities.

The two research projects employed a similar qualitative methodology to investigate engagement work which further enables comparison of their findings. Both research projects took the form of long-term (18 months) organisational ethnographies which included substantial amounts of time

embedded in the community outreach and engagement teams, and in addition, the researchers' own participation in community engagement projects. The material presented in this paper draws upon observations and semi-structured, in-depth interviews with community engagement workers – that is, those staff directly involved in the delivery of community engagement projects<sup>vii</sup>. This included 8 staff members in the Regional Museum and 10 staff members in the Municipal Museum (this data was gathered anonymously and after participant consent was given). Both studies were, independently, grounded in a practice perspective which foregrounded the everyday actions and micro-decisions of staff 'behind the scenes' as vital to understanding museums (Macdonald, 2002).

When we initially began our respective projects, we did not anticipate making the case for community engagement as a space of care. Rather, our commitment to demonstrating the 'caring' that is done within museums came about as we gradually recognised the actions of museum professionals as contributing to the creation of spaces of care within community engagement schemes. We came to the idea of co-authoring a paper through a series of conversations about our research experiences in museums, and in particular, the effects of austerity on our research contexts. Looking back at field diaries and interviews through new theoretical lenses, specifically the emerging literature on progressive localism, we came to further recognise the distinctive articulation of care within the deepening context of austerity. As a collaborative piece then, we have sought to draw out commonalities and differences in our research milieu, and to draw attention to the ways in which museums' community engagement schemes may represent dynamic new spaces of care. As a caveat however, because this paper focuses on the practice of museum professionals, the voice of participants is absent and we do not directly address the continued presence of power relations and exclusions (see Lynch, 2011).

Participants in community engagement projects are usually identified through established community groups, voluntary organisations or via welfare agencies and health and social care services, and typically could be considered vulnerable or otherwise marginalised. For example, across the two

museum sites, projects have included work with mental health charities, addiction services, care homes, the Probation service, refugee and asylum seeker groups, and young people deemed ‘at risk’, amongst others. While there is no programmatic ‘script’ for how community engagement projects are delivered - since these differ substantially between museum services and according to the group being engaged (Simon, 2010) – there are, however, common features: community engagement programmes generally involve small groups of people coming together for weekly, fortnightly or monthly sessions facilitated by museum professionals around a specific theme, collection, or exhibition (Munro 2014). Programmes are tailored to the group and often include exhibition visits, ‘behind the scenes’ tours, object handling and a creative outcome, such as arts and crafts, creative writing, or photography. Projects can take place either in community spaces (also known as ‘outreach’) or in the museum. Community engagement programmes might result in a display or exhibition, or they may simply be about building relationships between the museum service and non-user communities.

### **Community engagement as a practice of care**

In the following section we present two short vignettes from our museum sites to illustrate the caring work that takes place within community engagement sessions. The following is adapted from Munro’s fieldnotes, taken after a community engagement session that brought together recent migrants to Scotland, and young local students:

*After our session today, which had been lively, chatty and (unusually) very much driven by the participants, I asked a fellow facilitator whether she could pinpoint what had made it such a good session. She said, that she thought we’d reached the stage in the programme where people feel comfortable talking about themselves and their hopes and worries, their future plans and everyday problems. Staff often say that they attempt to create spaces where participants can talk freely, and where they know they will be encouraged, and listened to, and where their knowledge is understood as valuable.*

The second extract is taken from Morse's fieldnotes written up after a conversation with a member of the Outreach team at the Regional Museum after a digital storytelling session with a group of seven mental health service-users;

*For a few days now, we have been musing on how to 'do' a good engagement session. It is not necessarily easy or obvious to articulate. After a pause, she says: 'I am constantly looking for signs and getting a general idea for what the feel is when you get in a room and you respond to that in the way you think is the best way'. Maybe that's what makes the engagement feel real: there is commitment to making a connection, and a motivation for doing it in the 'best way' – not for the museum, but for the participant.*

The formations that spaces of care can take in museums have been extensively detailed elsewhere (see Munro 2014). By bringing our two sites into conversation, we can focus more clearly on some of the central practices of care that support the creation of such spaces. The affective, relational and material dimensions of this practice are briefly highlighted here to illustrate our understanding of the forms of 'care' and 'caring' in museum work.

The first concern of museum staff in community engagement project is always to provide a welcoming, inclusive and safe environment for participants, and most importantly, a space in which participants feel they will not be judged. Several commentators have noted how museums have the potential to act as safe spaces, as they are nearly always non-stigmatising environments (Camic and Chatterjee, 2013; Silverman, 2010). In the first quote, we see how museum staff create such environments over time, assuring individuals that their situated experiences and knowledges are valid and valuable. Inclusive spaces are also based on technical access arrangements, tailored to the needs of specific groups. These are part of the psycho-social texture of community engagement sessions, which are underpinned by a multitude of ordinary caring acts, such as taking time to share cups of tea, getting to know each participant's name, and generally being friendly and approachable. As Parr,

Philo and Burns (2004, p. 406) suggest, while these mundane acts of care may seem diffuse, they often ‘demonstrate the reality of inclusion’.

A further element of the practice of care in museums is staff’s efforts to create social spaces, for example through group activities and end of project celebrations. Of course, simply performing these actions does not ensure that inclusion or safety is felt by participants: these acts also need to be part of ongoing caring interactions with participants. Munro (2013, p. 56), drawing on Conradson (2003b), suggests that the caring spaces in museums are best understood as spaces that aim ‘to support the emergence of more positive selves’. This is arguably made possible through the acceptance, support and encouragement that are consistently displayed by museum staff towards participants, demonstrating what Conradson (2003b, p. 508) described as the ‘proactive interest of one person in the well-being of another and as an articulation of that interest (or affective stance) in practical ways’.

For the community engagement practitioners in both sites, museum programmes are understood as able to improve individual’s wellbeing through the distinctive ‘museumness’ of the activities, highlighting the material dimension of care in this context. Elsewhere, Askins and Pain (2011) have argued for the need to pay attention to the ‘geographies of matter’ within participatory projects. In community engagement programmes museum objects are central but not intrinsically or aesthetically; rather they are important because of how they enable points of connection. These points of connection may be personal or emotional, or they may be about sparking a new interest - for example in how an object was made. Crucially, the specificity of museum care is that it is also done through *touching* objects and *making* a creative response through arts, crafts, or photography (see also Chatterjee, 2008).

### **Professional identities and the creation of spaces of care.**

We have highlighted the importance of museum workers’ purposeful efforts to create and maintain safe, ‘caring’ spaces. While many of their gestures can be seen as mundane, they are underpinned by a



set of beliefs concerning the purpose of museum engagement work, the articulation of which found a starting point in the notion of ‘social inclusion’ in museums. In both museum sites, the commitment to the idea of social inclusion can be traced back to the early work of the museums’ education teams – in the Municipal service, this was formalised as early as the 1940s. The official policy drive for social inclusion through the New Labour years mainstreamed this commitment in both services. This is exemplified in the growth of the services’ Learning and Outreach teams, and attendant changes in the professional skillsets of these teams. Over this period, the services invested in new positions focused on attracting individuals who were skilled at communicating and working with potentially vulnerable or excluded individuals, rather than requiring narrow subject specialisms linked to collections. As a result, in both the Municipal and the Regional, the background of staff is now mixed, including community arts, youth and community work, social work and teaching; and other staff with a more ‘formal’ background in heritage or museum studies.

The social inclusion agenda first required museums to ensure that they were accessible to as many social groups as possible; however it quickly expanded to include more tailored and instrumental goals. As Tlili et al. (2007) have described, ‘social inclusion’ has been interpreted in diverse ways, however there has been a marked tendency towards a focus on ‘getting people in’. For the teams at the Regional and Municipal museums, access was understood as underpinning community engagement and, crucially, as going beyond statutory provision. For the engagement teams we spoke to, the notion of ‘social inclusion’ was not simply about fulfilling policy demands – in their collective view culture should be accessible to all as a point of principle.

For the teams in both sites, community engagement was first about using museum collections as resources for constructive identity work (what we have described above as enabling the creation of ‘more positive selves’). One Municipal Museum worker summarised how community engagement might boost confidence, aspiration, and wellbeing in individuals, stating:

Getting people in a room, sitting and listening to one another. You're meeting people perhaps you wouldn't ordinarily meet, talking in a safe environment [...] and that will help you in your dealings with folks on a daily basis. You might be more outgoing, more confident, because you've seen how your stories, your experiences, what you know, who you are, you know, that matters. You might treat others differently (Municipal Museum engagement worker, 2009).

Community engagement is, then, seen as potentially beneficial both at the level of the individual and at the level of the community, or the individuals' wider social sphere. The relationship between these two levels was often understood in terms of the 'ripple out' effect, where individual engagement has a wider social impact.

Staff in both museums spoke explicitly about their current practices of museum engagement being influenced by their background. Within the Municipal Museum, for example, many museum professionals had previously worked in social work, the formal care sector, and within youth or criminal justice settings. In the Regional Museum, professional identities were also linked to the formulations of engagement work:

I was in contemporary public art and galleries [...] and I thought it was too elitist [...] I also had some experience in community engagement - not in terms of a museum or cultural perspective but actually about identifying issues with communities and participatory action [...] That was the community side, and the contemporary art side wasn't fulfilling enough so I thought where do these two things come together? And they met through social inclusion and the museum (Regional museum team member, 2013).

Another important point of connection then between the two museum sites is the diverse professional identities of museum workers, and the ways in which these have shaped the practice of community engagement.

In the Regional Museum the logics of community engagement were explicitly linked to the social responsibility of the museum as a local authority-funded service. This was framed in terms of a shared responsibility to work with a range of organisations to deliver social impacts in relation to local forms of disadvantage. As one member of the Regional team put it,

There was also an ethical side of things - we didn't just want to get people [just] connecting with collections, it's more than that. We want to make a difference to people's lives, and believe we can do this through art and culture (Regional museum team member, 2013).

At the Municipal Museum engagement projects were also linked to a sense of responsibility to community; however this was imagined in large part as related to the wider ethos of the organisation. As we have described above, while in practice many projects aligned with local council objectives, these operated outside of a formal governance agreement. While there are differences in underlying drivers, these understandings of social inclusion have shaped the kinds of progressive partnerships that have been developed across the two sites, which we detail below.

Crucially, museum professionals did not see themselves as social workers; rather they saw their role as supporting wider processes of individual social care and community development through heritage and creative programmes. This point is important, as there is a tension that runs through the role of museum engagement workers. When pronounced by other staff not directly involved in the work of engagement, the phrase, 'social work' often held pejorative connotations, as detracting from the 'core' functions of collections and display. In some cases, then, it was used as an argument *against* socially engaged activities, especially at time of budget reductions. For the engagement teams, this distinction

was important but in ways which were about qualifying the professional domain of their work and their field of expertise:

We are not social workers. But we have to work with people who are, and with their clients, and we do things that look like social work. So we should be trained, I think, but we should be aware of the limits of our ability (Municipal Museum engagement worker, 2010).

We have a lot of skills that community development workers and social workers have but that are not what we are employed to do. It's very important that we are not seen by a participants as being able to offer those skills. And that is why we always work in partnership with staff from other organisations (Regional Museum engagement worker, 2012).

Staff in both museums positioned their engagement practice in relation to social work. Of course participants in museum projects were often individuals with experience of other social care or formal care services, however staff made this distinction in order to highlight the limits of care insofar as it is practised within the museum, and the importance of partnerships in situating this work within broader landscapes of care.

### **Community engagement as 'resistance'.**

At the centre of the museum professionals' practice in our two sites was a sense of commitment and responsibility to local communities, established over time through the idea of 'social inclusion', and reinforced in light of current period of austerity. While museum workers were affected by the cuts to the cultural sector, in terms of budget reductions, job insecurity and low morale, for the community engagement museum workers in our two sites, the consequences of austerity politics was perhaps most deeply felt in relation to the circumstances of partner organisations and community groups. In several cases, job losses meant that the museum teams lost their key contact and partnerships folded; in other cases, reduced budgets meant partner organisations redirected resources and personnel away from cultural or creative programmes towards their core activities; and in some instances, community

support organisations disappeared altogether as their funding was pulled. More generally, because of budget reductions and new challenges facing their service users, these partners felt they were having to do ‘more with less’, and struggling with fewer staff.

Many museums workers spoke of a sense of responsibility towards these social and community workers. As one worker put it: ‘there is a sense of responsibility to the people you work with on the ground – if you lose that you lose the point of what’s being done’ (Regional Museum worker, 2013). There was also a personal sense of empathy with the service users and community members who were experiencing daily challenges in relation to changes in welfare and social care provision. More broadly, these senses of responsibility and empathy could be seen to come together in re-orienting the practice of museum engagement to provide more explicit spaces of support and care within the community.

As Hill (2005) has argued, it is important to pay close attention to local social and cultural formations when investigating the ‘shape’ that community engagement programmes take in any given place. In the case of the Municipal Museum, community engagement takes place against a backdrop of persistent social problems – the locality within which the Municipal Museum operates is well-known for poor public health, high levels of alcohol and substance abuse, and a high unemployment rate. Similarly, the Regional Museum has numerous venues working in some of the most socially deprived wards in the region, with a similar range of problems, notably around mental illness and alcohol misuse. As Hamnett (2014) notes, these entrenched problems have arguably been exacerbated across the country by the current context of austerity.

However, the context of austerity was seen by many across the two museum sites as opening up the possibility of spaces for ‘resistance’: that is, spaces where new productive relationships, partnerships and collectives could flourish. In the Municipal Museum, this sense of collective purpose represented an opportunity to instigate progressive projects at the local level:

There is a feeling that folk are being let down by the people who are supposed to help them [...] All these services that people rely on being hollowed out. In that kind of context, anything that we can do to help, well, I will push for that. It underpins a lot of what I do, the projects I plan and put forward, the partners I try and enrol (Municipal Museum engagement worker, 2013).

This museum professional spoke of the need to recognise that a number of institutions and organisations were now working towards the same goal, to undermine austerity and to protect local services. The Municipal Museum worker did, however note that due to the extreme precariousness of many of the organisations he wanted to link up with, that these initiatives tended to be opportunistic and responsive. It was difficult to build long-term, formalised partnerships with organisations that were operating under conditions of extreme precariousness. As a result, many of the partnerships the Municipal Museum was involved in were largely museum-led, which the Municipal Museum worker admitted was not ideal given that the service was striving to hand communities greater control over projects. As Lynch and Alberti (2010) have argued, instigating community projects that are largely museum-led opens museum services up to accusations of tokenism.

Staff within the Municipal Museum stated that they sometimes found it difficult to build relationships with vulnerable or marginalised individuals, groups and communities. One staff member stated that this was because the museum service was understood as one of a series of local institutions that were not to be trusted. One worker suggested that the museums service was perceived as having an ‘agenda’, and noted that many communities saw it as an arm of the state, and therefore potentially prescriptive, punitive or disciplinary (see Lepine and Sullivan, 2010). She understood why local communities might feel this way, but felt that through her work she could show individuals, groups and communities that the museums service was ‘different’, and that its staff could be trusted.

I have no problem in going cold-calling on communities and saying ‘Do you want to come and do this’ but many communities are extremely sceptical [...] I come across them regularly. There is a lot of distrust, they assume something must be wrong so that we will approach them (Municipal Museum engagement worker, 2010).

At the Regional Museum, austerity has also focused a renewed determination in the work of the team; however in contrast to the Municipal Museum, it has entailed developing long term partnerships with social care services. This new model of working emerged within a particular set of timings and circumstances. Reflecting on the last decade and more of museum engagement work, the team at the Regional Museum felt the impact of their work in its current form was limited:

Increasingly it felt like we were working on a conveyor belt of projects and it was very much a numbers game [...] we seemed to work on ten or twelve week projects and that would be the end of that, and then we would work with somebody else. [...] You feel like you are dipping in and out (Regional Museum engagement worker, 2012).

A key issue for the team was the lack of sustainability of community engagement, due to the ‘short termism’ of projects (Lynch 2011; Krachler and Greer, 2015). This also had consequences in terms of developing trust with community organisations. In order to resist what staff sometimes called ‘the conveyor belt’ of projects, the team re-focused its core practice towards developing long-term partnerships with a smaller number of partners. A starting point was the team’s core understanding of the purpose of engagement work in terms of the ‘social responsibility’ of working in a local authority museum, which led them to re-assess the social impact of their work *vis-à-vis* key social issues in their locality. To this end the team used local authority documents such as the Joint Needs Assessment (a document outlining the social and public health needs of a local population) to identify local issues, for example, the issue of alcohol misuse in the North of England. Through this exercise, four key

partners were identified from the health and social care sector, including a mental health organisation, a substance misuse service, the probation trust, and a partnership between care homes and NHS services working with older people living with dementia. The Manager of the Regional museum engagement team described the rationale for this new approach:

I think we are very justified in thinking this as a team because if you think about it, the [museum] mission statement [...] It's all about people, it's about their self-worth, it's about their identity, it's about where their place is in the world [...] The reasons why some of the people we work with are supported by their agencies, the service they are involved in, is because they have had a disconnect, and I think what we are trying to do, and those organisations are trying to do, is help people to kind of cope with what life throws at you (Regional Museum engagement team manager, 2013).

This new model of working, which we describe in detail here due to its novelty and originality, is about building creative heritage programmes within social and healthcare services. Building upon the museum mission, and the service's commitment to access and inclusion, staff seek to reposition museum engagement as part of a wider landscape of care. For partners in social services, care is about providing the right level of intervention to enable people to achieve independence and control over their lives, and to reintegrate into the community by taking part in activities that match their own interests and aspirations. However recent public spending cuts and staff reduction in health and social care have had a severe impact on what these services can provide 'in-house' and their capacity to initiate community activities. The museum team spoke about how austerity was opening up the possibilities for new productive partnerships by 'bringing people together':

Because of the impact of the recession really I feel now that it's going back to basics in a way - not to sounds too Tory-esque - instead of delving into things, being more considered about



things and resources as well. Not to replicate what's out there but maybe to hone into more ways of supporting things, supporting communities and community work (Regional Museum engagement worker, 2012).

The Regional team is also engaged in a process of resistance, in linking the museum up with front-line services that are providing direct forms of support for vulnerable or marginalised groups. A particular feature of these partnerships has been to clearly align the objectives of the museum with the objectives of the health and social care organisation to resist the effects of cutbacks:

We are helping these big organisations to meet whatever their aims are [...] One of the ways is doing really positive activities and positive experiences like peer socialising - and it might be building up their skills, their confidence, and their self-esteem: all of those things are part of a package that helps people to either be abstinent or to be more stable. And we are part of that - we are not saying that we help people solely to do that, but [...] we are like a link in that chain (Regional Museum engagement worker, 2012)

The strategic approach developed at the Regional Museum also reflects wider policy changes in England. Faced with internal pressures and budget reductions, the Regional team was also looking for funding opportunities outside of the cultural sector and within the new public health commissioning model (Krachler and Greer, 2015). This required reframing the impact of community engagement programmes in terms of wellbeing and health. One member of the Regional team commented that tapping into this funding was pragmatic and adaptive: 'museums are having to prove the value of museums. I think the museum is finding out it has to work more like a direct statutory service provider. It's not a new thing but we have to package it to suit the statutory service.' (Regional museum team member, 2011). Staff felt that inclusive museum engagement had positive impacts on health and wellbeing by supporting more positive selves, but recognised the need to make the links clearer since previous engagement work had not been explicitly evaluated on those terms. This trend

is noticeable across the wider UK museum sector, with the recent announcement in 2015 of the National Alliance for Museums, Health and Wellbeing. Another set of wider circumstances also influenced this shift in the Regional Museum: with the aforementioned move from DCMS to ACE funding, central policy directives and requirements were momentarily suspended which created an opportunity for the team to reassess its priorities.

Engagement teams across our two study sites are re-organising museum objects, collections, buildings and their own professional skills towards the emotional and practical support of individuals, groups and communities in response to austerity. These efforts can be understood as contributing to an alternative landscape of progressive localism. Specifically, we have shown that they present progressive possibilities for creating spaces of care. These spaces of care are created and sustained through the everyday, mundane practices of museum engagement workers, and are expanded through the discursive reworking of these practices towards more explicitly progressive ends. In both sites this has been about grasping the opportunities at hand to respond to local need and create strategies of collective resistance. These forms of resistance are not merely defensive but are outward-looking (Featherstone et al., 2012) and productive of a new framework for public museums which imagines their civic role in more expansive ways, and constructs their engagement practices within wider landscapes of care.

Both services are finding individuals and partners to work with – from a range of settings - who share similar goals. However the shape that this resistance takes is different across the two sites. At the Municipal Museum, it is a responsive approach that draws on the service's long history as a progressive service, and at the Regional Museum, resistance takes on a more pragmatic form. So while the case of the Municipal approach raises questions of sustainability, the Regional brings to the fore issues of equity and diversity in terms to the scale and reach of such programmes (see O'Neill, 2010).

Of course there is a need to be cautionary in presenting these shifts in practice as uncritically progressive. First, as we have noted in the Municipal Museum, the museum may still be perceived as an arm of the state, and may be 'tainted' by that association. Because the engagement team is only a small part of the organisation, this perception was difficult to shift as it was understood to be maintained (unintentionally or otherwise) by other departments. Interestingly, at the Regional Museum, it was exactly through this 'institutional' role as a local authority museum that the progressive alternative for local provision was played out.

Second, at the Regional Museum, the team's alignment of museum work within welfare reforms may be interrogated, as indeed it was by staff: 'in terms of commissioning I think it's a necessary evil. And I say evil because it's weird to think that you have to pay for certain services, but it's probably a sign of our times' (Regional museum team member, 2011). Indeed, the new commissioning model is an attempt to promote the privatisation of the NHS (Krachler & Greer, 2015; it should be noted that welfare provision in Scotland is differently organised). However, to view the museum's new model of working in pessimistic terms as a mark of museums professionals abetting neoliberal goals is to ignore the longer tradition of progressive community engagement work in museums, and the role of staff in appropriating policy discourses and the structures of funding to alternative ends. As Williams et al (2014) note, this work should not be automatically discounted as carrying out neoliberal conservatism, and indeed museum staff themselves consciously resist this interpretation of their practice.

## **Conclusion**

We have demonstrated how museums' community engagement schemes can be understood as spaces of care, adding a new site of interest to wider geographies of care. In particular, we focused on the role of museum engagement workers in shaping these spaces through their everyday practices, and through their work with a range of voluntary and community organisations, and the formal social care sector. Our purpose has also been to show how these are evolving in response to uneven cut backs

across welfare and social services in the UK. The spaces of care created and maintained within our respective museum services were extended and reinforced via new and renewed partnerships with local organisations and services

In bringing our respective research projects into conversation, we sought to compare and contrast organisational approaches to care in museums. A common feature of the two cases was the diversity of professional backgrounds within the teams which are shaping new roles for museum professionals. These new roles are not about 'social work' per se, and are better understood by thinking through museum practice in relation to care. We further argue that these practices of care are evolving in the context of austerity as museum engagement staff actively seek to resist austerity politics and its effects on their project partners and the wider local communities within which they are embedded. A particular point of divergence in the two museums was the new structures of community engagement: in the Regional Museum this was explicitly linked to the understanding of the social role of the museum as a local authority museum and through strategic partnership; at the Municipal Museum, this work was primarily (though not exclusively) generated 'in house' by the longstanding, skilled engagement team and took on a slightly more 'ad hoc' form. The divergent ways in which community engagement plays out within two similar-yet-different museum services emphasises the importance of investigating local museum contexts.

Through the two examples presented in this paper, we argued that in the current context of austerity, the museums' practices of care are becoming allied with wider networks of care, and that this development can be considered in terms of progressive articulations of localism. To us, Williams et al's (2014, p. 2798) call for recognising 'forms of interstitial politics of resistance and experimentation' dovetails with Askew's (2009) appeal to investigate the multiplicity of ideologies at work within institutions, and the everyday work of those service providers who find themselves at 'the sharp end' of implementing – and contesting – institutional change. Askew's (2009) particular concern is with the caring that is done within institutions; she notes that institutions – particularly

state institutions – are often seen as faceless, hierarchical, bureaucratic and prone to failures of care. However, Askew (2009) shows that by investigating the everyday work of service providers, other possibilities emerge. Similarly, Tronto (2010) has recently argued that such investigation can highlight the formation of ‘ethical’ institutions, and we feel our work speaks to this emerging trend in the study of institutions.

There are different and competing tensions within museum services, not least between managers and curatorial or learning roles. As a form of resistance and experimentation, community engagement is often also about grasping the opportunities at hand within the organisation itself. Indeed in both our museums, staff felt that their work was not necessarily recognised, understood or valued by other departments or senior management. This can limit efforts to reposition the museum as a caring institution, and it should be recognised that the work of the teams described in this paper is only representative of a small section of the museums’ activities. Nonetheless, this work opens up new directions for museums and cultural organisations more widely.

Thinking about the cultural sector more generally, we hope that this paper prompts a rethink as regards the role of cultural institutions in the current era of austerity. Hewison (2003) has argued that, in England in particular, culture was previously understood as a vital part of the welfare state, however since the 1980s and the undoubted hollowing-out of many areas of what could previously have been called ‘welfare’ – social care, health, cultural provision – the link between culture and welfare has become distorted. Certainly in terms of the current cuts to public spending on culture and the government push towards philanthropy and entrepreneurship, there is a sense that cultural organisations such as museums are increasingly being encouraged to ‘fill the gaps’ in provision created by austerity measures. These shifts require further critical attention.

As our paper has shown, with austerity comes new forms of collective organisation and resistance. Often, ‘resistance’ to government strategy and policy directives is understood as located within small,

grassroots organisations (Larner 2014), however crucially, our research shows that larger organisations such as our respective museum services are often well-placed to enable and drive forward 'resistance'. By virtue of their relative stability, the resources that are available to them, and their long-standing engagement with local communities, they can often locate spaces for critique and progressive action that might otherwise remain unexplored and unexploited. Moreover, museums present particularly interesting spaces for shaping the very terms upon which the idea of place is generated, as they reflect the stories and histories of community through their collections and display, and also present creative opportunities for rejoining the relations between place, politics and globalisation (Featherstone et al. 2012). In these ways, there is a potential for museums to be mobilised in powerful ways as part of emerging alternative localisms.

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<sup>ii</sup> What actually constitutes 'the museum' has been the subject of fervent debate within museum studies and other disciplines, particularly since the reassessment of theory and practice prompted by the New Museology in the 1980s (Vergo, 1989). To our minds, 'museumness' resides in a concern with ensuring public access to diverse objects, collections and sites, and facilitating education and enjoyment. We note that while the museum remains a distinct institutional space, increasingly it is embedded within a wide-ranging set of social relations and subject to a number of instrumental policy pressures, leading to debates about the 'museumness' of some museum activities – particularly, community engagement and outreach. We are confident in emphasising the inherent 'museumness' of these activities however, in that they are, in our experience, also animated by a concern with ensuring public access to diverse material cultures, and generally have an educational component.

<sup>iii</sup> While we discuss Big Society rhetoric elsewhere in this paper, for reasons of space we cannot deconstruct the idea to the extent that we would like. See Williams et al (2014, p. 2799) for an excellent discussion of 'Localism and the Big Society in context'.

<sup>iv</sup> The Museums Association provides a useful timeline of cuts here:

<http://www.museumsassociation.org/campaigns/funding-cuts/19122012-cuts-timeline> These surveys have found that a large proportion of museums have seen their overall income reduce, some by over 25%, which has led to redundancies and staffing restructures with implications for staff morale. The surveys also report that museums have been obliged to reduce opening hours, cut free events and curtail school visits and outreach work.

<sup>v</sup> We will not here enter into debates over 'professionalism' as discussed within the sociology of professions (on this topic see Kavanagh, 1991). We view the museum profession as a profession 'in the making'.

<sup>vi</sup> In response to suggestions from reviewers, and in order to preserve the anonymity of research participants, both museum services are anonymised throughout the paper.

<sup>vii</sup> These staff may be community engagement or outreach professionals, curators, staff employed in learning and education, or even trained volunteers.